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Subject: House hearing on fracking bans veers into induced earthquakes

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Mike Soraghan, E&E reporter

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As a Californian, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher doesn't think much of Oklahoma's earthquakes.

"What dollar damage was done?" he asked of a witness at a hearing yesterday. The witness did not know. "My guess is not very much. My guess is it's like a truck going by."

Oklahoma had 585 earthquakes of magnitude 3 or greater in 2014, according to U.S. Geological Survey records. That's three times as many as California.

Rohrabacher, a senior member of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee, was speaking at a hearing of the science committee. Republicans billed it as an opportunity to demonstrate why it is a bad idea for cities in Texas to ban hydraulic fracturing, as happened in Denton, Texas, last year. The title for the hearing was "Hydraulic Fracturing: Banning Proven Technologies on Possibilities instead of Probabilities."

But with news out of Texas and Oklahoma about scientists determining that wastewater disposal from oil and gas operations cause earthquakes, the hearing often drifted toward a rumination on "induced seismicity" ([EnergyWire](#), April 22).

The star witness of the hearing was Christi Craddick, chairwoman of the Texas Railroad Commission, which is in charge of overseeing oil and gas in Texas and has nothing to do with trains. She's a rising figure in Texas politics and a leader in the effort to beat back local bans.

She's also dealing with earthquakes. A research team led by Southern Methodist University this week released a report attributing an outbreak of quakes last winter to injection wells around Azle, northwest of Fort Worth ([EnergyWire](#), April 22).

The commission's seismologist, hired amid the public uproar about the quakes, has questioned the SMU report's methods and assumptions. The commission has invited the researchers to provide a briefing on their findings.

"We take seismicity very, very seriously," Craddick said. "What these studies do is rule out issues, but I'm not sure they can ever tell you for certain what is causing them."

The top Democrat on the committee, Texas Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, said she felt an earthquake recently on the sixth floor of an office building in Dallas. She accused Republicans and those fighting the local bans of dismissing people's legitimate worries about industrial activity in their neighborhoods.

"This frightens people, we're not accustomed to earthquakes," Johnson said. "Is the answer to keep them from expressing their concerns?"

There's been a rash of quakes nearby in Irving for the past few months, but there are not any disposal wells nearby, and seismologists have not linked them to oil and gas activity.

"Irving is the earthquake capital of Texas," Craddick said, "but there's not a lot of oil and gas there."

In Texas, an effort to quash local fracking bans is moving swiftly. The Texas House last week passed H.B. 40, a bill to prevent cities from regulating oil and gas drilling or any associated activities, with an overwhelming 122-18 vote.

"Without clearly defined regulatory roles for cities, oil and gas development -- and its ability to anchor the Texas economy -- is in jeopardy," Craddick said.